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How do novice specialists in human resources develop their professional identity?

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Abstract

Any profession's components - social responsibility, specialized knowledge, autonomy of practice, and commitment for public service - are integrated through professional identity development. This study aims to determine the processes through which future specialists form their professional identity. Based on a qualitative design, using an inductive approach, 29 narratives from first year Master students in human resources were analysed and themes referring to professional identity were defined. Presenting an emergent model, the study emphasizes the importance of professional learning in early professional identity development, highlighting how cultural mechanisms, students' expectations and group dynamics help future specialists work autonomously and responsibly.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Professions and professional identity

According to Sullivan (2005), professions involve a specialized body of knowledge, autonomy to regulate standards of practice, and commitment to provide public service. Another key component of any profession is social responsibility for the quality of services the professional provides. These four equal components are integrated through the process of professional identity development. Research has shown that it is associated with striving for quality in the process of learning (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004). Moreover, having employees with highly defined professional identities can become a competitive advantage. Such employees are more responsible and

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autonomous, have a better understanding of their roles, and have a higher level of self-efficacy. Consequently, they perform efficiently and at high standards in terms of quality; as a result, they can ensure a strategic contribution to organizations (Barney & Wright, 1998). It follows that the rigorous study of professional identity development becomes extremely relevant, in order to determine the contents and the processes that are to be taken into consideration when it is important to attract, retain and develop such specialists.

The work of human resources specialists involves a high level of accountability and responsibility towards individuals and the community, as they intervene in many aspects of employees' daily work activities (Solbrekke&Englund, 2011). Although most specialists have an explicit understanding of their professional identity, many perceive their organizational role in different and even opposite ways; as a result, they do not fully assume it (Parkes& Davis, 2013). Accordingly, it is paramount that early (academic) professional development includes the component of professional identity, as it is indispensable for future specialists in human resources.

Professional identity is a developmental task through which a set of career-related cognitions, emotions and behaviors are integrated into the core self. It is formed through a cyclic process of exploration in breadth (analyzing various professional goals and values) and commitment (adopting a particular set of cognitions, goals and values). Commitment is also an iterative process, consisting of commitment, exploration in depth and reconsideration of commitment. Consequently, after making a commitment, individuals will either strengthen their choice, or change their professional path (reconsideration). People can experience these processes several times in their lifetime, depending on their experiences – for example, role transitions (Crocetti, Schwartz, Fermani, &Meeus, 2010). However, once a particular commitment is made, individuals actively form, maintain, improve or revise their identity (Ibarra &Barbulescu, 2010).This can be accomplished through narrative identity work. Studies have shown that self-narratives, on the one hand, express one's identity and, on the other hand, facilitate identity (re)construction, providing meaning. Identity as a narrative is particularly important during macro work role transitions. Because new roles require new skills, behaviors, and patterns of social interactions, they may produce fundamental changes in an individual's self-definitions. Consequently, self-narratives will be prevalent. On the personal level, identity work will provide authenticity and self-consistency, compensating the changes. On the social level, it will obtain validation as a coherent career path that makes sense. Successful self-narratives that generate authenticity and social validation are more likely to be kept and used in the future (Ibarra &Barbulescu, 2010).

1.2. Research purpose and objectives

The present study aims to investigate how novices in human resources conceptualize professional identity. Three research objectives have been formulated: to analyse novice specialists' thinking patterns regarding their professional identity in the field of human resources; to determine the contents novices refer to as part of their professional identity; to determine the processes through which they form their professional identity.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research design

A qualitative research design was employed, using an inductive approach. Data collection in qualitative research studies offer rich, in-depth data(Patton, 2002); therefore, they are appropriate for observing social phenomena such as professional identity development in the academic context, as people tend to express it in socially accepted and acceptable ways (Ibarra &Barbulescu, 2010).

2.2. Participants

First year students from three different Master's programs in Human Resources, from Romania, were invited to take part in the study. A purposeful sampling technique was used, considering the research objectives. In accordance to the guidelines for conducting qualitative research (Patton, 2002), participants were selected until information saturation was reached: when no more relevant data was obtained, sampling was stopped, at 29 participants.

2.3. Data collection

Participants were asked to write an unstructured essay of approximately 500 words answering the question: “What is your story as a student in this Master’s program?”. Self-narratives were selected because they express narrators’ subjective perspective, reflecting identity construction and revision during work role transitions (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). As participants have recently experienced such a change (enrolling for a Master’s program, after getting a Bachelor’s degree either at the same, or at a different university), we found this was an appropriate method.

2.4. Data analysis

Data analysis is based on the dialogical inquiry model (Coget, 2009; Schein, 1993). Firstly, key words were extracted for every paragraph of each story. Secondly, key words were logically assembled main ideas – patterns in every essay. In the next step, themes were extracted from the patterns, which were defined and explained depending on the psychological concepts each participant expressed. Finally, categories referring to the contents of professional identity were developed, which were thematically associated. Lastly, identity processes were illustrated, according to the identity model proposed by Crocetti et al. (2010). Emergent themes and processes were combined into an emergent model regarding future human resources specialists’ professional identity, defining how each category contributed to a particular identity process.

3. Results

3.1. Emergent themes

Data analysis revealed a series of patterns which were categorized into five major themes. They represent the contents that future human resources specialists take into account when narrating about professional identity. Most students mention the theme of choosing a Master’s program in human resources, presenting arguments for and against particular programs. Their choice is based on a series of expectations regarding academic activities. Two types of learning emerged from data analysis: in-depth study, which promotes development, and reproductive learning, based on rote memorization. Another emergent theme refers to group processes, which significantly influence learning. A feedback loop appears between professional learning and motivation for learning.

3.2. Emergent model regarding how novices develop their professional identity

Considering that professional learning is at the core of any Master’s program (as main objective), the model revolves around the process of study. When the choice of a Master’s program is consciously and responsibly internalized, realistic expectations about professional learning (as central activity) are set. Mostly referring to competence development and to future employment, these expectations are the result of a series of cultural values and assumptions which promote in-depth study, engagement and responsibility for one’s own professional development: “Study leads to my development”. Participants who share these cognitive schemas engage in in-depth study, considering every experience “a learning opportunity”. The mechanisms through which the academic culture supports this type of learning are accepting ambiguity (“From ambiguity we extract knowledge”) and transdisciplinarity (“I have learnt and I still learn, every day, to make connections and interdisciplinary comparisons”). The cultural values behind in-depth study are: offering support (“The constructive feedback helped me know and educate myself better, which made me responsible for knowing the culture that we work in”), knowledge sharing (“Knowledge sharing has a significant impact on my professional, academic and personal development”), encouraging authentic thinking (“There’s no problem if we don’t answer correctly. Teachers are interested in how we think”), reflection in action (“I believe that I am becoming a reflective practitioner”). A particular type of in-depth study is experiential learning, which considers students and teachers alike agents of learning. Teachers’ role is to facilitate and guide learning, creating an open climate in which both cognitive and

affective involvement is fostered (Ramsey & Fitzgibbons, 2005). Other hallmarks of in-depth study are group processes. For instance, participants mention that group identification – either with their study group (“What matters in our group is supporting each other, knowledge sharing and constructive feedback”), or with the whole community of human resources specialists (“I am very lucky to have the opportunity to be here”), group learning (“We achieved a high performance”) and responsibility for and because of the group (“Being part of this group makes me feel responsible for the way I study”) are essential for sustaining high levels of engagement; this results in rigorous, responsibly assumed professional development. Students who study in-depth experience pleasure (“I worked hard and I liked it”) and motivation for learning (“As a student, my enthusiasm and motivation have gone through difficult times, but have remained intact”); therefore, there is a closed feedback loop between the two processes. Two types of motivational orientations emerged (Dweck & Leggett, 1988): while some participants are mastery oriented (“I strive for my personal and, of course, my professional development. My story as a Master student doesn’t stop here”), others are performance oriented (“We’re going to present our study at a conference, which is great, because our work and our results will be known and our merits will be recognized”).

It becomes clear that students engaging in in-depth study have a highly defined professional identity, exploring their professional commitment in-depth (Crocetti et al., 2010). At the opposite end of the spectrum are students who have either chosen a Master’s program because the environment was familiar (“The best way for me to extend my knowledge was to enroll in this program, because I knew the teachers and my colleagues from my previous faculty”), or at random (“I didn’t really know what this program was about”). Consequently, their expectations were inappropriate considering the Master’s central activity – professional learning: “What would have been normal was to get more practical information, to learn from human resources specialists coming to us in order to describe their work”. Such expectations are rooted in narrow and simplistic, culturally based, values and assumptions – the role and the responsibility for professional development is not one’s own, but the teachers’. As a result, students engage in reproductive learning: “The role of the university is to provide theoretical knowledge”. External attributions (Gordon & Graham, 2006), in addition to the cultural values that support them, are inappropriate for professional development, as only memorization is encouraged. Motivation for learning is minimal, which inevitably increases the lack of interest for study. Such cognitive schemas narrow students’ ability to recognize learning opportunities in the environment, making them unconsciously select only the elements that confirm their vision.

Professional identity development in the case of future human resources specialists is at the core of the present model. This process is based on learning, which is either in-depth, or reproductive, based on rote memorization. Learning, as one stage in the process of professional development, depends on individuals’ choice of and expectations’ from a Master’s program. However, it is organizational culture that shapes both types of learning, through the cultural values and assumptions (Schein, 2006) that are reiterated in the organizational environment. Therefore, organizational culture determines students’ theory in use (Argyris & Schön, 1978), which reflects the way in which professional learning and professional identity development take place. This model emphasizes the importance of professional learning in early professional development of novice human resources specialists, highlighting emergent contents and processes describing professional identity.

4. Discussion

4.1. Implications

Professional identity development is an important professional outcome. Similar to the results of this study, Gibson, Dollarhide, & Moss (2010) showed that in order to form personal definitions about a profession, students should be involved in practical experiences in a given field of activity; this can be accomplished through various forms of hands-on learning, or in-depth study. A clear argument in favour of in-depth study is the fact that it encourages students to engage in self-reflection, in order to become aware of their own thinking patterns, by knowing the impact their values and their basic assumptions have on professional learning. Students’ actions towards professional development should be supported, as having a highly defined professional identity may contribute to such values as professional autonomy and responsibility, or intrinsic motivation.

In addition, identity is developed through sharing values that support students to consciously and responsibly engage in learning activities; examples of such values are offering support, knowledge sharing, encouraging

authentic thinking, reflection in action, or facilitating experiential learning. Such values promote development, because students become aware that it is them who can make the greatest contribution to their degree of professionalism. Therefore, they should be integrated by educational service providers into the curricula, by expressing the competencies students will get engaging in in-depth study, since its outcome is professional learning.

4.2. Recommendations for future research

Future research may include a follow-up study, at the end of the Master's program. This way, the progress of professional identity development can be rigorously investigated. This is particularly relevant as the influence of the organizational culture becomes more stable over the time and shapes the theory in use more powerfully (Argyris & Schön, 1978). The better we understand identity dynamics, the more we can influence educational policies in order to ensure high quality professional development for novices in human resources. In addition, it is worth investigating professional identity development according to the self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Recent studies have shown that intrinsically-oriented organizational values facilitate in-depth learning (Vansteenkiste, Timmermans, Lens, Soenens, & Van den Broeck, 2008), irrespective of people's motivational orientation and work goals.

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